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RHMFISS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000420

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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION SHOWDOWN IN THE COMOROS

REF: A. 06 ANTANANARIVO 1410

1B. TRENKLE-NEUBERT EMAIL 4/25/2007

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JAMES D. MCGEE FOR REASONS 1.4 B, D

11. (C) SUMMARY: Political tensions are running high in the Union of the Comoros as the Union and Anjouan Island Governments jockey over whether President of Anjouan Mohamed Bacar (known for his secessionist tendencies and prickly relationship with the Union Government) must step down preceding the June 10 Island Presidential elections, in which he plans to run for reelection. The Constitutional Court (CC) ruled April 27 that Bacar's mandate ended April 14, and Union President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi subsequently designated an interim President of Anjouan for the less than 60 days preceding the election. In a private phone call with Ambassador McGee April 28, Sambi reiterated his request (REFTEL) for U.S.-funded military training for Union security forces, preferably to begin preceding the election, and expressed his desire to see the African Union (AU) step forward to guarantee free, fair, transparent, and peaceful elections. Anjouan is calm for now, but Union officials and the residents of Anjouan are nervously awaiting Bacar's response. END SUMMARY.

CONSTITUTIONAL COURT RULES BACAR MUST STEP DOWN
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12. (U) April 14 marked the five-year point of Bacar's term as President of Anjouan -- the moment at which many of Bacar's opponents in both Grand Comores and Anjouan argued he should resign from office by law if he wishes to run for reelection. In the "touch and go" two-week period that followed -- while Bacar publicly announced he would continue to rule the island, imposed a curfew, and strictly controlled incoming and outgoing flights from the Anjouan airport -- Union Government officials debated how to address the issue. The CC ruled April 27 that Bacar's mandate ended on April 14 and an interim president must be named on Anjouan for the period before the elections. The CC ruling suggested the Union President, the "arbiter and moderator of the regular functioning of institutions" throughout the country, is responsible for designating an interim president on Anjouan. The following day, Union President Sambi publicly designated Houmadi Kaambi, current President of Anjouan's Assembly, as the interim Island President and charged him with forming a representative interim government within five days of taking office.

SAMBI REQUESTS U.S. ASSISTANCE

13. (C) In a private phone call with Ambassador McGee April 28, Union President Sambi reiterated his request for U.S.-funded military training for Union security forces in the form of three to five U.S. military trainers for a period of one to two months in order to raise the professionalism of the Union forces. Sambi also wants to see the AU step forward to guarantee free, fair, transparent, and peaceful elections -- in particular by dissuading Bacar from creating any problems. (NOTE: An AU assessment team recently traveled to the three islands to determine the level of security needed for elections. Post understands AU assistance, provided almost entirely by South Africa, will likely consist of a small military/police training team, logistical support including helicopters, and an electoral observation team (REF B). END NOTE.)

ANJOUAN CALM...FOR NOW

14. (U) Residents of Anjouan are nervously awaiting Bacar's response. As of 1700 April 30, Bacar's only public moves consisted of closing the airport for several hours in the morning in the hopes of preventing Union officials and security forces from coming to Anjouan. The airport has since reopened.

COMMENT

15. (C) This is the latest example of the federalist problem of "division of competences" between the Union and Island

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Governments. The historical tension between Union President Sambi and Island President Bacar is only exacerbated by the vaguely worded and sometimes conflicting French-based legislation agreed to in 2001 that leaves much open to interpretation. However, the Comoran Constitution gives the CC the right to judge the constitutionality of both Union and Island laws and resolve conflicts therein. Empowered by the CC's ruling, President Sambi is determined not to let Bacar run for reelection unless he agrees to step down. That said, Bacar has power on Anjouan, including armed forces, and may decide to call Sambi's bluff. In that case the Comoros will edge closer to a return to the crisis of secession that the 2001 legislation was intended to resolve.

16. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: To the extent that a strong AU presence is likely to help defuse any Union-Island showdown, we recommend supporting such an effort at preventive diplomacy. END COMMENT.

McGEE